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In Short

NONFICTION

SECRET CONTENDERS: The Myth of Cold War Counter-Intelligence. By Melvin Beck. (Sheridan Square Publications, P.O. Box 677, New York, N.Y. 10013, Cloth, \$14.95. Paper, \$7.95.) After 27 years as an intelligence officer, first with the National Security Agency and then for nearly two decades with the Central Intelligence Agency, Melvin Beck came to the sad conclusion that much of what he and his colleagues did was pointless and silly. But his memoirs are not the bitter ruminations of a disaffected former employee. Despite his profound criticisms, the reader can detect lingering pride and affection for his longtime employers. Still, he retired with more than a few doubts about how he and others in the intelligence business went about their work. For eight years Mr. Beck was a case officer for the C.I.A.'s Clandestine Services in Cuba (in the days just after the Cuban Revolution) and then in Mexico City. His job was to find out what his counterparts in the K.G.B. were doing. He bugged the apartment of one agent and his family and says he only managed to learn how Russians toilet-train their children. He helped hire a prostitute-mistress with the hope of compromising a Soviet Embassy code clerk, to no avail. He even planted a tiny pencil-bomb outside the apartment of a Latin American statesman in exile, hoping the explosion would dissuade the man from returning to his country to run for office. The bomb never went off. It is impossible to know if Mr. Beck's experiences are typical. But even if they are not, "Secret Contenders" offers a credible and revealing look at American counterintelligence and at how little it may actually accomplish.

— Joel Brinkley